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International Standardisation and Local Participatory Dynamics : The INTERNORM Project

Paper proposal for the panel J 106 'The shaping of international regulation and local practices'.

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This paper presents a pilot project (INTERNORM) funded by the University of Lausanne (2010 – 2013) to support the involvement of civil society organisations (CSO) in international standard setting bodies such as the ISO. It analyses how a distinct participatory mechanism can influence the institutional environment of technical diplomacy in which standards are shaped. The project is an attempt to respond to the democratic deficit attested in the field of international standardisation, formally open to civil society participation, but still largely dominated by expert knowledge and market players. Many international standards have direct implications on society as a whole, but CSOs (consumers and environmental associations, trade unions) are largely under-represented in negotiation arenas. The paper draws upon international relations literature on new institutional forms in global governance and studies of participation in science and technology. It argues that there are significant limitations to the rise of civil society participation in such global governance mechanisms. The INTERNORM project has been designed as a platform of knowledge exchange between CSO and academic experts, with earmarked funding and official membership to a national standardisation body. But INTERNORM cannot substitute for a long-established lack of resources in time, money and expertise of CSOs. Despite high entry costs into technical diplomacy, participation thus appears as less a matter of upstream engagement, or of procedure only, than of dedicated means to shift the geometry of actors and the framing of socio-technical change.